

## Message

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**Subject:** FYI: Wolverine PFAS article

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## Miles From Flint, Residents Turn Off Taps in New Water Crisis

By Mitch Smith

Nov. 24, 2017

PLAINFIELD CHARTER TOWNSHIP, Mich. — They found pollutants in the water at the National Guard armory in June. Then contractors showed up to test nearby residents' wells, many of which were also tainted. Soon, people from several miles around were turning off their taps and even brushing their teeth with bottled water.

Panic over the water in this part of western Michigan seems to grow by the day. The Rogue River, which runs through, tested high for contaminants this month. Days later, Gov. Rick Snyder of Michigan announced an "action team" to address the substances. Health officials say they are studying a possible cancer cluster.

The source of much of the tumult: a local shoemaking company, Wolverine Worldwide, the maker of popular footwear brands like Hush Puppies and Merrell and a mainstay in this area since 1883.

Decades ago, Wolverine dumped sludge and leather from its tannery in the woods around here. For years, the company and the government stayed mostly silent about the trash piles, even as developers built houses and a golf course near them and even as researchers documented serious health risks from chemicals in the sludge.

Now residents say they sense grim echoes of the ongoing crisis in a different part of this state, Flint: the bottled water, the finger-pointing, the hard-to-decipher test results. And indeed, some of the same government agencies that botched the initial response to lead-tainted water in Flint three years ago are on the case here, trying to avoid past mistakes and reassure residents.

Still, fear abounds.

"You just sort of lose your peace," said one Plainfield Township resident, Meaghan Schweinzger, a day before crews arrived to remove rusty barrels and leather scraps from the hillside near her children's trampoline.

Ms. Schweinzger's well water is among at least 30 to have been found to exceed the federal government's recommended lifetime exposure levels for PFAS, also known as perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances. She lives on the same street where Wolverine once dumped sludge that included Scotchgard, the waterproofing chemical used in Hush Puppies shoes that contained PFAS.

Though PFAS, once common in household products, have been linked to serious health problems such as decreased fertility and increased cancer risk, the science about those risks is still developing and regulations are limited. At least three states, including Michigan, have issued warnings about eating fish with high levels of PFAS.

“It keeps you up at night,” Ms. Schweinzger said. “You don’t sleep, because you’re wondering, ‘What don’t we know yet?’”

The scope of the problem remains an open question. Wary locals have been reporting potential dump sites — 76 so far, state officials say — in backyards and hillsides in this area just north of Grand Rapids, where the suburbs fade into the countryside. Wolverine officials said they were helping investigate those sites, but said many were not theirs.

Kathleen Shirey, who is helping lead the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality’s response, said her agency had not been fully aware of Wolverine’s past dumping and was continuing to investigate whether other reported dumpsites were related to Wolverine. She blamed shoddy record-keeping and loose dumping regulations in past generations.

“We’ve asked the company — they apparently don’t have too much, either, in way of historical files,” Ms. Shirey said. “So what we’re primarily relying on is citizen memory and reports.”

Wolverine officials acknowledged dumping waste, but said they had complied with applicable laws at the time, and were committed to working with regulators and cleaning up the mess. The officials emphasized that the health risks of PFAS were not known at the time of the dumping, and that the extent of those hazards remains unknown.

Several nervous residents pointed out flaws in Michigan’s response in Flint, about 120 miles east, where the state’s environmental quality agency gave assurances about a 2014 change in the city’s water source that ultimately poisoned people with lead and put them at risk for Legionnaires’ disease. That debacle led to involuntary manslaughter charges against the state’s former top drinking water official, as well as the state’s chief medical executive, the director of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, and other government workers.

Flint, a majority-black city that has struggled with depopulation and poverty, looks very different from Plainfield Township, which is mostly white and middle-class. And the causes and details of the two crises are very different. But residents of both places use some of the same language to describe their fear, their feelings of betrayal and the sense that they are stuck in a dangerous waiting game.

“It’s the same way with Flint,” said Sandy Wynn-Stelt, whose water in Plainfield Township tested well above the advised levels of PFAS. “People were willing to sacrifice people’s lives and people’s livelihoods and people’s value because they wanted to make a profit or they wanted to spend less money.”

Ms. Wynn-Stelt’s husband, Joel Stelt, died last year of liver cancer. Though proving a cause of his cancer may never be possible, Ms. Wynn-Stelt said she suspects the contaminants may have played a role. Exposure to PFAS has been tied to liver problems and some kinds of cancer.

“I’ve got to believe drinking Scotchgard for 24 years was probably a little bit taxing on his liver,” said Ms. Wynn-Stelt, who is part of a group of residents that has filed a notice of intent to pursue a lawsuit.

Wolverine officials declined to comment on Mr. Stelt’s death, but said they were doing everything possible to clean up the contamination and reassure residents. The company has also tried to pass some responsibility onto

3M, the maker of Scotchgard. Officials with 3M responded with documents saying they told Wolverine about the PFAS risk years ago and that Wolverine had failed to act.

Wolverine's claims "are as misguided as they are transparent," William A. Brewer III, a lawyer for 3M, said in a statement. He called blaming 3M an "attempt by Wolverine to deflect scrutiny of its own disposal practices."

Wolverine has provided bottled water, grocery store gift cards and whole-house water filters to families believed to be at risk for contamination. Christopher Hufnagel, a senior vice president for the company, said it was voluntarily working with Michigan regulators to clean up the mess.

"We think the actions we're taking today are the right thing to do," Mr. Hufnagel said last month. "Certainly this has caused some anxiety, and we're working to alleviate that anxiety."

Some residents gave passing grades to the efforts to respond to the tainted water, but others criticized Wolverine and the environmental quality department for not taking action years ago, especially in 2000 when the maker of Scotchgard announced plans to reformulate the product and PFAS were increasingly recognized as a risk to health.

"Where was the D.E.Q. with forcing cleanup and forcing Wolverine to pay for it?" said Patti VanderZouwen, who lives about half a mile from a dump site near the armory. Her family continued to drink bottled water even after a test did not reveal PFAS in their well.

The recent outcry here has validated the concerns of a small group of residents, called the Concerned Citizens for Responsible Redevelopment, who for more than seven years have sought additional government scrutiny of Wolverine's environmental practices, and who were sometimes met with resistance for criticizing a hometown company.

Richard Rediske, an environmental chemist at Grand Valley State University, has worked with that citizens' group, and he suggested a link between Scotchgard and the elevated levels of PFAS in fish near the Wolverine tannery, which closed in 2009.

He called the current situation "truly a big health hazard," and said Wolverine needed to "pick up the pace and do more studies."

As uncertainty festers, residents said they were struggling to adjust. People have discarded vegetables from backyard gardens. Parents have limited outdoor playtime for their children. Many residents said they fear their houses will never sell now.

But some signs of normalcy have returned.

Ms. Schweinzger said that her daughter, who as an infant drank formula mixed with water from the tainted well, missed taking baths after the contamination was discovered. But the family's whole-house water filter was installed a few days ago, and the girl, now 6, celebrated with a bath.